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War with words

Hephzibah Anderson

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Paperback of the week

In 2003, the calm in Daoud Hari's village in the Darfur region of Sudan was shattered by the roar of helicopter gunships. Shortly afterwards, government-backed Janjaweed militiamen swept in on horseback, raping and murdering and torching homes. By the time their work was done, "ashes and graves" were all that remained of this once thriving, vibrant village.

His brother was killed but Hari managed to escape across the nebulous border with Chad to a refugee camp, where his English, Arabic and mother tongue, Zaghawa, were strong enough to get him recruited to a UN team charged with deciding whether the atrocities should be classed as genocide. In all, he heard the accounts of 1,134 survivors, heart-rending each and every one.

While others took up arms, Hari chose to fight with words and a mobile phone filled with the numbers of rebel commanders, local bigwigs and NGO officials. Determined that his people's story reach the wider world, he began acting as a guide and translator for foreign journalists, accompanying them on perilous trips back to Darfur.

Sudan had banned reporters from the region, branding them foreign spies, and helping them was a crime punishable by death. On one such trip Hari, his Chadian driver, and an American journalist were captured and moved from prison to prison, tortured and beaten along the way. The story of their eventual release is gripping as any thriller.

Despite its harrowing content, this is not a bleak book. Seamless digressions evoke Hari's childhood, a vivid blend of traditions stretching back thousands of years and fragments of Western culture – novels like *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* along with Clint Eastwood movies. His love of the natural world and of camels in particular is transcendent.

Horror and joy both are captured in bold, lucid prose, and in his diciest moments, Hari draws on a fearless gallows humour. Standing in a dusty road with a warm gun muzzle pressed against his temple, for instance, he wonders whether it had been fired recently or had just grown hot from the sun. "I decided that if these were about to be my last thoughts, I should try some better ones instead."

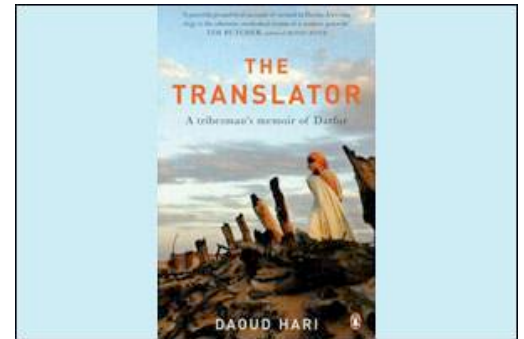
The book ends with a "Darfur Primer", enabling Hari to unpick the complex tangle of modern greed and ancient hatreds that have fuelled the atrocities. His outlook for the region remains optimistic, and against all the odds, what shines through is a belief in the essential beauty of life. As he puts it, "To not get killed is a very good thing. It makes you smile again and again, foolishly, helplessly for several hours. Amazing."

Reviews

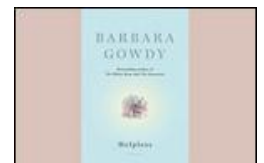
Helpless

At nine years old, golden-haired, mixed-race Rachel Fox is possessed of a beauty so luminous that strangers stop her frowsy lone parent Celia in the street to remark upon it. Unfortunately, she has also caught the eye of repairman Ron. When a blackout engulfs Toronto one hot summer's night, Ron snatches Rachel and locks her in his basement, helped by his girlfriend, a former junkie.

Though he tells himself that he is saving Rachel from an imagined child molester, his own darkest desires soon simmer to the surface. Neither overly sentimental nor gratuitously graphic, this chilling tale unfolds from the alternating viewpoints of its main characters. While Ron grapples with his paedophilic impulses, Rachel begins to trust him and a distraught



The translator: A Tribesman's Memoir of Darfur Daoud Hari
Penguin Dh64



Helpless Barbara Gowdy
Abacus Dh58

Celia distracts herself from the seemingly futile police hunt with reflections on the possessive aspect of parent-child love. Though this tense narrative doesn't quite come together as a novel, its constituent parts will enthrall and unnerve in equal measure.

The Dawn Patrol

Boone Daniels was riding waves on his father's shoulders before he could toddle on his own two feet, so it's not surprising that as an adult, he lives to surf those same Californian waters. To make ends meet, he works as a private investigator, but when the strait-laced British lawyer Petra Hall hires him, he finds himself embroiled in a case that gets his adrenalin pumping faster than a "thunder crusher" with a 20-foot peak.



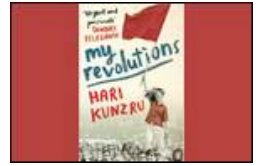
The Dawn Patrol Don Winslow
Heinemann Dh94

What begins as a simple hunt for a witness who has vanished ahead of an arson trial soon deepens to encompass a murdered stripper, a child prostitution ring, and Hawaiian gangs. Along the way, Boone must untangle his own relationships and deal with the mystery behind his short-lived police career.

Diverting and snappily written, this novel may not teach you much you haven't already read about human nature, but you'll pick up plenty about surfing and the metaphysics of big waves.

My Revolutions

Mike Frame will shortly turn 50 and he is not looking forward to it at all. The narrator of Hari Kunzru's driven third novel has more reason than most to cower before this milestone: he is not really going to be 50, and he isn't Mike Frame; he's Chris Carver, a failed 1960s anarchist whose CV runs to bombings and auto theft.



My Revolutions Hari Kunzru
Penguin Dh58

Naturally, his wife and stepdaughter know nothing of his past, but a shady character from those feverish years is now threatening to expose him. At around about the same time, a sighting of an ex-lover and former comrade – a woman he'd long supposed dead – has him gazing yearningly back.

As a former subversive, Chris has shifty, mixed feelings about his present life of provincial ease, working in an antiquarian bookshop while his partner Miranda goes from strength to strength as an entrepreneur. While the narrative toggles back and forth between past and present, Kunzru considers the moment at which idealism curdles into something far more lethal.